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Supervision of Placed-Out Children

(With Special Reference to Those Who Should Ultimately Be Returned to Their Families)

By KATHARINE P. HEWINS

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THE office telephone rang. "Dr. Howe speaking. My colored cook wants to find a home for the five-year old child of a deceased friend. She can pay the board and will clothe the child."

Next morning the visitor from the Department of Advice and Assistance in the child-caring agency to which this case was referred, started her investigation. There was apparently little to learn. Diana, the cook, either didn't know or wouldn't tell. "She didn't rightly belong to mah frien'," she explained. "She got her from a lady in New Jersey and I don' jes disremember 'bout her; but anyhow youse is all right 'cause I'm gittin' good wages an' I sho will pay her boahd reglar."

But the visitor needed to know more: who was the child and did she have any relatives; what was her background and what sort of foster home, if any, did she need? Other clues lacking, little Gracie herself was questioned. Carefully and tactfully she was led to describe her life in the city of R—. She recalled her mother. Her name was Kate. Then there was Josie who, together with her mother, had been in the big jail just across the street from where they all lived. With this slender clue in hand, the investigator wrote to a sister agency in R— which skilfully identified the family. Gracie's mother, it appeared, had been born in Virginia of respectable parents and had left her home to hide herself and her shame in the city where she had given birth to this illegitimate

child. Her parents had mourned her as dead and did not know of the child's existence. When confronted with these facts, Diana broke down and admitted she had feared to tell the truth and that Gracie's mother was her own cousin. Correspondence with responsible citizens in their home town found the grandparents pathetically eager to give a home to the child and to atone through her for their lack of understanding of their daughter. And so the little girl was sent south to be brought up by her own people who would love and rear her as no foster parents, however well chosen, could possibly do.

This story serves to illustrate the need of searching investigation before children are received by an agency for placing-out. Only after every avenue has been exhausted, every effort made to keep or to establish a child with his own, should we resort to what is at best only a substitute for the real home with his own father and mother which is every child's right.

In his special message to Congress, following the White House Conference held in 1909, Theodore Roosevelt said: "Home life is the highest and finest product of civilization. Children should not be deprived of it except for urgent and compelling reasons." Over and over again, now in one form now in another, comes the heart wail of a child, "If I only had a mother she would understand." This is the expression of a God-given instinct born in every child and based on

a vital need—"to belong" as so many express it.

It is the recognition of this principle that has brought about the establishment of case work methods of inquiry in the best placing-out agencies. By this means a surprising proportion of applications is found to be capable of family adjustment.

But we must not delude ourselves. Every home is not a home. To keep a child with his natural parents just because they are biologically responsible for his existence may be quite as great an injustice to him as unjustifiably to separate him from them. What is needed in every case is such a weighing and examining of all the facts as shall lead to a decision based on the ultimate and real, and not the temporary or imaginary needs of the child, his family and the community. Such evaluation calls for skilled professional analysis and synthesis of the highest order. It presupposes a high ideal of the spiritual and moral values of family life.

Having reminded ourselves that good investigation often prevents the need of placing, let us consider the child who must be placed-out. Not until social work, like medicine and the law, develops a terminology of its own will social workers fully understand one another's use of terms. For the purposes of this article, the term "placed-out" is used with reference to any child separated for a longer or shorter period from his own blood relatives (other than his siblings) and cared for in a family home under the supervision of an agency, public or private. The term thus used applies to children placed in free homes, at board, or receiving wages. By a child is meant any minor under the age of twenty-one years.

Many child-caring societies have abandoned the institutional method

of care in favor of the more elastic system of placing-out, but too many have failed to follow the child with enough intelligently directed oversight after he is placed. Herein lies the source of much criticism of placing-out. The fault lies in the administration and is not inherent in the system.

NEED OF A DEFINITELY FORMULATED PLAN

When an agency assumes the grave responsibility of separating a child from his family, it takes squarely upon its shoulders the onus of a plan for supervision and the means for carrying it out. A deliberate formulation of such a plan at the outset is the first step towards putting it into operation. A second step is the commitment of this plan to writing so that the record is clear as to the intention. Without these steps it not infrequently happens that societies find themselves inquiring as to the underlying reason why this or that child was taken and fail to find the answer in the record. Without a clear-cut statement of the plan the very purpose in mind when the child was received may be unwittingly thwarted and supervision become aimless and desultory instead of pointed and orderly. It is not always possible or even desirable that the first plan should be carried out in full detail. Circumstances may arise later that indicate radical changes. The point is that these changes are more effective when made consciously and with deliberate reference to an original plan rather than in a haphazard and hasty fashion.

Every plan should include a dual supervision: that of the child in his foster home and that of his own family. These two parts of a whole are interdependent and for their best development should be conducted

under the direction of a single visitor. It is often fatal to good supervision of a placed-out child if the family is supervised by someone other than the child's own visitor. With the best of intentions and the most complete understanding of an ultimate end to be achieved, two visitors in the same society, not to mention two of different agencies, find great difficulty in not running counter to each other when they attempt team work of this sort.

SUPERVISION

Whatever supervision may be—and here again we need a definition—it is at least something more than an annual or a quarterly “visitation” by an over-worked agent who, upon her return to the office, commits to the record the negative report of “O.K.” or “Found child in good condition—seems happy.” It is rather such oversight of a child and his family as shall provide him with an environment which shall be a constant justification for the assumption that the supervising society is constructively shaping the life of a future citizen.

The following is an illustration of a failure to give adequate family supervision, whereby an investment became a wasteful extravagance: A child-placing society took into its care three small children. The plan as revealed by the record was: “Place Mary, Jeanie and Curtis while mother, whose prognosis is good, takes treatment at a tuberculosis sanatorium. Aunt Jeanie will take Sophie. As soon as father gets employment he should contribute towards support of the children.” All three children were young, normal physically and mentally. It was comparatively easy to place them together in an approved foster home favorably known to the society through repeated use. It was known from the first that only by constant oversight could the

mother be prevailed upon to stay her allotted time at the sanatorium and thus effect a cure. The foster mother's interest was secured and she wrote weekly to her, giving encouraging reports regarding the children's progress. Hard times continued to make it difficult for the father to get more than casual occupation. Though the children's visitor made suggestions of work opportunities by letter and urged him to come to the office, she did not *go to see him* and she did not *personally visit the mother* at the sanatorium. Meanwhile she visited the children with conscientious frequency, seeing them in their foster home and at school. They were taken to the dentist, their adenoids were removed and, last but not least, they went to the circus. The father found time and money to visit his wife and children, but did not contribute a cent for their support or volunteer any explanation of this delinquency.

And then the visitor learned quite by accident that, against advice, the mother had discharged herself from the sanatorium and was living with her husband in furnished lodgings. Their own furniture, not yet paid for on the installment plan, was still in storage. Meanwhile, the aunt who had taken Sophie had decided that if the mother were home she might as well have her child while she, the aunt, took a much desired vacation. The society was caring for the other children under these adverse home conditions. It had failed through lack of family supervision to impress upon these parents the significance of the whole plan and their part in it.

A more constructive bit of family supervision of placed-out children is the following: “Mrs. M—, a deserted wife, asked a child-placing society to care for her three children, fourteen, nine, and two years old,

respectively. The home was already broken up. The father, immoral and a bigamist, had been gone a year. The mother's physical condition was such that an operation followed by a long rest was imperative. The children were placed by the society; hospital treatment and, later, convalescent care were arranged for the mother. She dreaded the ordeal and had to be encouraged step by step. So too she had to be encouraged in regard to tracing and prosecuting her husband. But a patient, painstaking and resourceful visitor saw her frequently and together they worked out the future. At the end of a year, the mother's health restored and regular weekly payments coming from her husband, an apartment was leased, furniture bought and the home re-established. At this point Mothers' Aid was secured and the children returned to their mother. Even then, supervision continued for a year to make sure that all was well. At the end of the year this family was retired to a "perennial inquiry" list, a yearly follow-up that is something less than supervision, but which affords evidence of results both good and bad and serves to check up the work of a society.

And what of supervision of placed-out children themselves? They should be so cared for that when the time comes for return to their families, defects of body, brain and character that can be corrected shall have been remedied. The tendency of the curve of the chart—spiritual as well as physical—should be upward, depending in degree upon the qualities with which the children are originally endowed and the period they are under supervision. And for those who are permanently separated from their kin there is an even greater obligation, for they suffer from a handicap that entitles them to

very special watchfulness and solicitude.

ESSENTIALS TO GOOD PLACING-OUT

We would unhesitatingly place personality and training of the supervising visitor as the first essential to good placing-out. And this priority is not in any way belittling but rather emphasizing our second requirement, a good foster home. It is because the selection of the home depends in the first place on the judgment and character of the visitor and also because she has it so much within her power to develop that home through proper use to greater service, that we class her personality and training as of prime importance. A social worker with imagination may make admirable use of a home that looks useless at the outset. The writer recalls such an instance. A fourteen year old colored sex offender, possibly feeble-minded, had contaminated the children in her own neighborhood and was a menace to them and to herself. She needed intelligent observation in family and school life before the doctor could diagnose her as suitable for institutional care. The problem was how to give the child her due and to give it without danger to others. An intelligent childless couple, colored of course, living in a rural community away from neighbors was found willing to undertake the task; but when the school situation was investigated, it was discovered there was a barge ride of some two miles. Determined to master this difficulty, the resourceful visitor prevailed upon a well-to-do white neighbor to allow the child to go back and forth to school daily in her limousine with her own little daughter who was always accompanied by a maid. Thus the problem was solved and it took only a few months to determine

that the little colored girl needed custodial care.

The supervision and education of foster parents by the visitor is as important as her direct contacts with the children, especially the younger ones. Given the essentials of character and an economic status that is above the poverty line, many a foster home of otherwise indifferent development can, with judicious oversight, be brought into far greater usefulness than at first appears possible. In communities where placing-out has been carried on a long time and where foster homes are difficult to obtain in sufficiently large numbers, this is an especially important point. Another and perhaps an even more significant reason for working through foster parents as well as directly with the child, is the more natural relations which it establishes for him with the family. The more a child becomes truly a member of the foster family, and the more he can be identified with their community, the less he considers himself and is looked upon by others as belonging to a group of dependents.

In referring to the responsibility of the state for children in need of special care, Robert W. Kelso says:¹

It is necessary to the advancement of any community that the forthcoming generation be superior physically and mentally to the generation out of which it springs. Consequently, organized society owes to the growing child who is in need of special care sufficient protection to render reasonably probable his up-growth to the age of self-support with physical health and intellectual attainment equal to that of the average child in the community.

The economic wastefulness of merely patching up broken down human machines is acknowledged. Health

movements throughout the country encourage prenatal and postnatal care for mothers. The Children's Bureau, to stimulate interest in the early establishment of a sound body, undertook the weighing and measuring of all the young children of the nation. Nearly, if not quite one-third of the states now have some measure of physical inspection and physical education in the schools. Dental clinics, school doctors and school nurses testify to the change in emphasis from alleviation to prevention.

REQUIREMENTS OF GOOD SUPERVISION OF PLACED-OUT CHILDREN

1. *Physical Care*

Good supervision for the placed-out child means, first of all, a thorough preliminary physical examination by a competent physician. Remediable defects should be corrected. But this alone is not sufficient. Periodic re-examinations must be given. Only in this way can minor ailments be detected and incipient conditions arrested. If it be argued that such care is more than the average child in the community receives today, what shall be said of the dependency handicap from which our placed-out child suffers, and which the child in his own home never knows? This alone would justify any additional safeguards that may be thrown around the placed-out child. If the vicious circle of dependency is to be broken and the child escape the fate of his parents; if, in other words, he is to become a self-sustaining citizen and an asset rather than a liability to society, it will be because his opportunities have been increased and his power of resistance to things physically and morally evil has been strengthened. The line of least resistance for dependents is down stream. It

¹ *Standards of Child Welfare*, Children's Bureau Publication no. 60, p. 307.

takes a strong pull and a long pull to head them up stream.

2. Diagnosis of Mental Abilities

Routine mental examinations for children have not been thought as important as physical, but there is a growing appreciation of their value. Here again, as in medicine, we began by stressing the abnormal, the feeble-minded and the insane. For this reason a certain stigma has attached itself to these examinations, at least in the minds of the subjects and their parents. But when the emphasis is placed on prevention, on the positive value of mental tests as an aid to vocational guidance, coöperation is substituted for antagonism. It is as important that special abilities shall be encouraged as it is that dangerous types shall be segregated. Special classes for the intellectually superior child are coming, more slowly, perhaps, but none the less surely than special classes for the backward.

Well-rounded placing-out supervision includes a diagnosis of the mental abilities and limitations of each child. Such examinations should always be given either by a competent psychiatrist or psychologist. Nothing is more dangerous than the dilettante dabbling by social workers or teachers in this subject. Important as we believe the routine mental examination to be, we would rather see it omitted than given by an unqualified person. Intelligence quotients and mental age levels, if taken by themselves unrelated to other equally important factors, are usually misleading and often pigeon-hole a child in a most unfair manner. Rightly interpreted, they are a great aid to the understanding and fair treatment of the child. Social workers who supervise children should be in close consultation with the psychiatrist who will depend for much of

his data on the child's reactions to environment reported to him by the social worker. Together they will work out a program that shall be best adapted to the child's particular needs.

3. Religious Training

Religious training is too often but slightly regarded. It must be given in definite form to the placed-out child and no merely negative attitude towards this vital matter should be tolerated. A placed-out child has a right to be put with a family of his own faith where he will receive definite religious training. It is part of good supervision to follow him into his Sunday school and church relations. So long as denominational differences exist, care should be exercised to insure the continuous upbringing of a Protestant child in the particular denomination to which his parents recognize allegiance. In taking this position we are conscious that it is not a popular view, and may not at first seem to square with the religious tolerance with which we are in entire accord. In our experience we have seen many a Protestant child given such a medley of religious instruction in the course of his journeyings from one foster home to another that he has grown up, not with a breadth of view and tolerance on religious matters but rather with a total disregard for worship in any form. Roman Catholic and Jewish children are already safeguarded in this particular. Childhood is not the time to leave a human being adrift in matters which relate to his soul's needs. If he is to develop spiritually as well as physically and morally, he must receive religious education quite as definitely and regularly as he receives instruction in the three R's and the moral code. Later in life he will thus be better prepared to select for himself that form of worship that

appeals most strongly to him, and only thus will he have a foundation on which to build his own faith.

4. *Recreational Facilities*

Play is growth under the supervision of the great achieving instincts, the chief of which are hunting, fighting, creation, rhythm, nurture, curiosity and team play. They form the constant element in the child's life and become the warp of the resulting fabric.²

Very glibly the formula that recreation is vital to the all-round development and growth of the individual is repeated, and yet how comparatively little is done about it. As part of a constructive program for the supervision of placed-out children, it is sure to be given more emphasis in the future than in the past. Beginning with the need of the infant for self-expression, this instinct must be given opportunity for growth. It is a well recognized fact that babies do not thrive on the congregate plan. Froebel tells us that no matter how complete the physical surroundings, there is nothing that replaces the mother who, through her natural contacts, develops the play spirit essential to physical growth and even to life with the very young. Later on, play has moral and spiritual significance.

Each age period has its special play features. The dramatic age when the imagination must be wisely guided is followed by the age of reality. Then wholesome outdoor sports make their appeal. An opportunity is afforded to develop team spirit and an obligation towards the rights of others. Play rightly directed, puts a restraint on present gratification for future gain. It is the medium in which self-mastery and loyalty towards others is developed. Foster mothers should be led to regard as essential, recreation

adapted to the age and condition of each child.

For the older children, gymnasium, Boy and Girl Scout activities, skating, swimming and even dancing and music lessons, all in their proper sequence and in accordance with the needs of the individual child, should be arranged, always under careful supervision. Necessary attendant fees should be borne cheerfully by the agency and recognized as legitimate expenses like eye-glasses and dentistry.

5. *Adequate Clothes, Etc.*

The limits of this article forbid more than passing reference to such a detail of supervision as clothing, more important in character-building than many realize. The self-respect engendered in a fourteen-year-old girl who is allowed to make her own purchases under supervision and who thereby receives perhaps her first lesson in thrift and true economy, can best be appreciated by those who have witnessed the change wrought by this means in such a girl who has lived not merely in "hand-me-downs," from older brothers and sisters, but in cast-off garments donated by strangers. A suit "like other folks'" contains a powerful psychological impetus towards better human behavior than we are prone to believe.

Thriftlessness, lack of fore-thought, inability to save for a rainy day grow out of early environment and poor home training. The majority of dependent families come from homes where living is a hand-to-mouth affair. A placing-out society has a wonderful opportunity through its controlled environment to teach budgeting at an early age. Allowances from five to twenty-five cents a week have great educational value. Whenever foster parents can give an allowance to children too young to earn small amounts,

² *Play in Education*, by Joseph Lee, p. 62.

they should be encouraged to do so. Whenever they cannot do it themselves, it should be considered a legitimate charge upon the society's funds. In every instance, the child should be held to give a strict account of the money and be taught to budget it for benevolence, gifts, recreation and savings. The age and development of a child should control the amount of the allowance, but a small one carries fully as great educational value as a large. Later on, boys and girls alike should be encouraged to earn small amounts by doing errands, picking berries, wheeling a baby for a neighbor and the like, and these small earnings should gradually replace the allowance.

Supervision of the sort we have in mind cannot be given to a group of children exceeding forty. The group should be smaller if any considerable number of babies, unmarried mothers or other special problems is included. Distance of the foster home from the office as well as accessibility are among other considerations.

6. Frequent Visits

One frequently hears the query, "How often ought placed-out children to be visited?" Supervision means so much more than merely visiting that one hesitates to say how often a visit should be made to the foster home. As a guide, but not as a rule, the writer feels that any child who has not been seen in his foster home for two months is in danger of being neglected. As a safeguard against this, certain agencies require the visitor to report such children to a supervisor. Circumstances may justify the visitor in having let this interval elapse. Nevertheless, it is a danger signal and should be watched by a supervisor. Contrariwise, a child, especially when he first comes into care and has been placed in a home that is new to the

society as well as to him, may be visited to advantage weekly or oftener. Adjustments between foster parents and children are facilitated by sympathetic oversight. A dictatorial overlord attitude on the part of the visitor must never be indulged in and, above all, anything approaching a spy attitude should be discouraged. Rather should there be established a frank comradeship whereby the visitor is accepted as next friend, but a companionship that in no way sets aside the child's relationship to the foster home. It is a delicate balance to maintain, this ultimate responsibility of a society for the welfare of the child and the development of an at-home atmosphere between foster parents and children. Those who have done it testify that it is a workable adjustment.

SUMMARY

To sum up the principles of wise placing-out:

1. Children should be separated from their own families only after all practical measures have been exhausted for continuing or making possible reasonably good family life.

2. When it is clearly indicated that the family cannot be maintained with advantage to the group, and placing-out is shown to be desirable for the child, and when it may be looked upon as treatment designed to reestablish the child in his own home, or when this is impossible, to set him on the road to maintaining an honest and industrious life, then:—

3. Such constructive supervision shall be given the child and his family as shall tend to correct the conditions which made the separation necessary.

4. The placed-out child, being under a dependency handicap by virtue of his lack of parental care, needs all the safeguards and opportunities for a full development of his powers that the

average child in the community needs, plus special safeguards and even greater opportunities because of the handicap from which he suffers.

When we speak of dependency we do not limit ourselves to economic dependency; on the contrary we would include the child dependent upon others than his natural protectors for love and sympathy and understanding. Nothing can replace the mother who, looking into her child's face, sees her own and her husband's weaknesses and strength reflected there and seeing knows and understands and loves and forgives as no other human being ever can do. Nothing that human ingenuity can devise will replace good parental care in the life of a child. In spite of all our efforts, preventive and remedial, many thousands of children fail of this, their just due. When this happens, whether through the fault of

the individual or of society, it is society's obligation and its own safeguard to give the best substitute possible. For most children this is a foster home, carefully selected with the needs of the individual child in mind, and supervised by a naturally endowed, well educated and specially trained person who has the fundamental qualities of tact, humor and love of her kind.

Time was when any well disposed decadent female of uncertain years was thought equal to the task of directing the lives of placed-out children. Today the job is looked upon as of such importance and dignity that it ranks as a type of work which calls for careful preparation and study of the technique of case work. The social surgery which is implied in the separation of a child from his family is a task big enough to challenge the interest of the best minds.

Social Responsibility for the Protection of Children Handicapped by Illegitimate Birth

By KATHARINE F. LENROOT

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IN its bearings upon social standards, family relationships, infant mortality, dependency and neglect, illegitimacy occupies a place of more than usual interest. Among all races and peoples from the time of the establishment of the marriage institution, the problem of birth out of wedlock has been present. As marriage became interwoven with private property and inheritance rights, the stigma upon illegitimacy increased, and also the hazards to which the child born out of wedlock was subjected. In an effort to prevent illegitimacy and to stamp out infanticide, which was alarmingly prevalent, Church and state in the Middle

Ages imposed drastic penalties upon the mothers. The children were deprived of civil and ecclesiastical rights; though during this period the beginnings of the modern movement for the protection of such children were seen in the establishment of foundling asylums, with their *tours* in which children could be left secretly.

Modern times have seen a marked change in the attitude of society toward the child born outside the sanction of the law, though only within recent years has this altered point of view been crystallized into legal form. From the decree of Napoleon forbidding inquiry into paternity, it is a long